

'Green' building policies crucial for reducing greenhouse gases

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Article Launched: 01/13/2008 02:19:43 AM PST

Despite all the public attention focusing on the harmful emissions that come from the automotive sector, the dirty little secret is that buildings are actually the biggest emitters of carbon dioxide in the United States. In fact, the U.S. Department of Energy reports that two-thirds of all carbon dioxide emissions come from stationary sources. According to the U.S. Green Building Council, buildings account for 65 percent of electricity consumption, 36 percent of energy use and 30 percent of raw materials use.

It would seem obvious, then, that increasing energy efficiency and reducing emissions from buildings would make the biggest impact in our growing efforts to combat the harmful effects of climate change.

The good news is that the green building movement is gaining steam in the Bay Area. Lockheed Martin recently celebrated LEED Silver certification on the first of two new facilities constructed to LEED standards, a widely recognized system for measuring building sustainability. Lockheed has also adopted a goal of getting LEED certification on all new buildings to meet a minimum Silver level. Adobe's headquarters continues to be celebrated as a cutting-edge green building at the LEED Platinum level. Google installed 1.6 megawatts of solar panels on its roof. First Community Housing was one of the first residential developers to adopt green building practices - elements such as recycled content building materials and furniture, low flow water fixtures and solar electricity generation for common areas. And, Webcor Builders has long been public in its support and leadership on green building. Green building continues to gain momentum every year, and as demand grows from tenants, developers are eager to meet that demand.

While the private sector's call for green buildings grows louder, public policy-makers must proactively support this growing wave of green architecture. Local governments' building codes and their permitting and building practices need to keep pace.

Here in Silicon Valley, the Santa Clara County Cities Association, in partnership with the Silicon Valley Leadership Group, has taken a bold position by creating a set of near-term green building policy recommendations. These are actions a local jurisdiction could adopt and implement today with little or no cost. The recommendations are:

- Adopt the LEED and GreenPoint Rated standards as reference standards. These standards are widely recognized and were created through a comprehensive, consensus-based process. By adopting the same set of standards, uniformity across jurisdictions will lead to ease of use and adoption.
- Require planning applications to fill out the LEED and GreenPoint Rated checklist. By filling out the application we accomplish two goals. First, we educate the private sector

on what green building is without mandates; second, we start to collect data on current building practices. This data can help inform future policy decisions on green building.

- Adopt the LEED Silver threshold for municipal buildings. All cities should lead by example and will also help develop a local green building industry.

Some policy-makers are already working to support the rapid expansion of green building. For example, in 2001 San Jose adopted a green building policy for municipal buildings and has recently strengthened this policy with plans to do more. San Francisco recently proposed a plan calling for all buildings over 75 feet tall and major commercial renovations of more than 25,000 square feet to be in compliance with the highest benchmarks for green certification set by the U.S. Green Building Council. And, Santa Clara and Campbell were the first cities to adopt the recommendations put forward by the cities association, with many other cities planning to do the same or more.

Smart green building policies promote a whole-systems approach to design and construction that results in decreased resource consumption. The resulting increased energy efficiency and reduced greenhouse gas emissions, and the proliferation of the new energy technologies that are being developed right here in Silicon Valley, are good for our environment and for our economy.

The Santa Clara County Cities Associations' progressive recommendations are an important step in promoting the proliferation of green buildings. The next critical step is for each city to make green building policies a priority. Doing so will allow Silicon Valley to lead the way to a cleaner and more prosperous California.

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